

PREPARED TO PROVIDE THE PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

Acts 8:26-38

TEXT: *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

In Jesus' name, my fellow redeemed:

Have you ever experienced the frustration and disappointment of spending time on a picture puzzle, and as you were near its completion you discovered that there was a piece missing? The picture won't be complete without the missing piece. Imagine the disappointment of those who worked so hard to be so religious, so good, so careful in putting all the pieces of salvation together, and by not having Jesus to make the picture perfect, spending their eternity in hell!

The Jews had witnessed the death and resurrection of the Messiah in their city. Everything that had been written in the Old Testament had now been fulfilled before their very eyes. The picture was complete as God Himself masterfully put the remaining piece of the puzzle together for them. Yet there were many who still did not know Jesus. Their Old Testament picture was incomplete.

A few weeks ago, we read about a woman from Thyatira named Lydia who was described by Scripture as a woman who believed in God. But she didn't know Jesus. No matter how much Lydia believed in God, if a person doesn't know Jesus he will go to hell. Either this is true or Jesus is a liar, for he has declared: ***No one comes to the Father except through me.*** Jn 14

Another example from the history of God's Kingdom is before us today. It is a man from Ethiopia who was one of God's Elect, but he didn't know it yet because he did not know Jesus. He was a "godly man" however, as Scripture reveals: ***This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship...*** He was a Jewish convert who faithfully made his way up to Jerusalem from Ethiopia. But this man did not know Jesus. Without this piece of the puzzle, he would be eternally damned. So the Lord sent Philip to him with the most important piece of the salvation puzzle.

My fellow redeemed: We have the Piece of that puzzle; Let us never hesitate to provide it to those who do not.

Philip was one of the deacons elected by his fellow Christians for service among the believers in Jerusalem. One day, God led him to the chariot of a man from Africa, a Nubian, or Ethiopian, who was reading from Isaiah, the prophet. He was reading Isaiah 53:7,8: ***He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.*** He asked Philip: ***Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?*** He had the puzzle, but the piece he needed to complete the picture of his salvation was missing.

Once again, we have set before us that wonderful doctrine of Election. Here is a man who had come close to the knowledge of salvation. He was a converted Jew, but like Lydia of Thyatira, he still didn't know Jesus. He was living in a far-away land and was an important official of the Queen. But the Lord knew where he was and had plans to prosper this man, not with earthly wealth, for was a rich Ethiopian. God would prosper him with eternal wealth through the humble efforts of Philip.

The Bible says: ***Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news***

about Jesus. In this quiet encounter, God reaches down, and, using Philip, placed Jesus, the missing piece of the puzzle of salvation into the picture. Philip knew that Jesus had died and rose again from the dead. He knew that Jesus was the answer to all that the Old Testament was about. So when the Ethiopian who was reading Isaiah 53 asked: **...who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?** Philip knew. It was Jesus! Jesus is the Key that unlocks our understanding of all things in Scripture and in life.

Peter said it this way: **But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.** 1Pe 3 We have that “piece of the puzzle” without which there is no salvation! When asked about our hope of salvation our simple answer is this: Jesus Christ, died on the cross for the sins of the world, and rose again for our justification. Jesus has commanded baptism for us that we can be assured that this salvation belongs to us personally. I’m going to heaven because Jesus died and rose again for the sins of the world, and because I’ve been baptized into his name that assures me that all that God has promised for my salvation is indeed my possession!

That’s why when Philip and the Ethiopian came upon some water, he declared: **"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.** So the Holy Spirit called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified another one of God’s elect!

That’s how the Lord works. Jesus is the key, the piece of the puzzle has in our hands and we are privileged to provide this most valuable piece of information to all whose picture of salvation is still incomplete. Who would hesitate to do this?

The Bible says: **...an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot...** Philip didn’t hesitate. He didn’t say, “You know, that man is from Ethiopia and probably has his own religion.” He didn’t shrink back and say, “He’s an important official! I’m just a regular guy!” He didn’t say, “I’m not an apostle, like Peter, James and John. I’m just a deacon!” Our sinful nature would rear its ugly head to frustrate the opportunities that the Lord sets before us, and so we often feel like we are not qualified, or able to step forward when opportunities present themselves.

Don’t listen to your sinful nature! Remember, this is all in God’s hands, not yours. While Jesus gives to all Christians the wonderful privilege to proclaim the Gospel, not all of us will be the one through whom the Holy Spirit will work. The timing is all in the Lord’s good pleasure. The same book of the Bible that the Ethiopian was reading also says a couple of chapters later: **... my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ... "my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.** Is 55 This time the Lord would use Philip. Next time, maybe God would not use Philip. But the joyous privilege was Philip’s to present the Key of Salvation whenever and wherever the Lord would lead him, without fear of failure, since the calling was all in God’s hands.

Another frustration that can ruin this wonderful privilege is a false sense of urgency that is sometimes forced upon the people of God’s church. It’s often said, “If we don’t go out and proclaim the gospel, then who will?” “If anyone goes to hell because I did not tell him about Jesus, will I be responsible?” Mission work is then turned from being the joyous privilege to a moral obligation which would terrify us in the fear of failure or neglect. For what we once learned in Sunday School and confirmation classes is a distant memory. We see the Bible as a thick book and we don’t know where to begin. Our friends and neighbors don’t know what we believe or have never had a reason to ask us about the hope that we have. And finally, each of us can recall many times when we remained silent when we should have and could have told the story of salvation. So, we say, “It’s best leave that to the pastors and theologians! That’s what we pay them for!”

While mission work is a privilege and a joy for us who have the piece of the puzzle, we confess our sinful fears and weaknesses, and our own lack of knowledge, and we ask the Lord’s forgiveness and mercy that the saving piece of the puzzle never be taken from our hearts. We pray: **Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.** Ps 51

It is a moral commandment, however, when the Lord gives us the personal responsibility of raising our children. Parents are given children with the commandment of being his representatives in the home. Jesus tells all of us, especially parents: *... if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.* Mt 18 Parents who bring their children to Holy Baptism, but then keep them from Jesus and the worship of his name, are in serious trouble with Jesus. If you know anyone who does this, tell them what Jesus says! I have! Jesus isn't kidding. Here, little child of mine, is Jesus in the water of your baptism..." and then they grab the puzzle piece of salvation from their tiny hands and hide it under the pretense of their arrogant unbelief that it doesn't matter anymore what you think of Jesus.

It is the Lord who gives us our children to raise in the knowledge of salvation. It was the Lord who set up this opportunity for Philip to present the piece of the puzzle to one of God's elect who was on the Lord's list to be saved. God Himself sent the man He wanted to send to find this lost soul at the right place at the right time. God has given you the children he has given to you.

Just be ready! If you fail, God's forgiveness is still yours. If you do not fail to provide the piece that is missing in the life of the one the Lord would have you meet in a mission endeavor, the joy is yours! What a thrill it is to see someone learn of Jesus because of you! What a thrill it is to see our children kneel at the altar of the Lord on their Confirmation Day!

So it is good to be prepared! We need only use what God already has given us. And the Holy Spirit, in His time, place and fashion, will use each of us in some way to let our light shine before others so that they may see Christ in us and perhaps ask us about the hope that we have. Then when they ask, may we gladly tell them what we know about Jesus who died and rose again. Then they too will have the puzzle of life and salvation complete. Amen